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# Reflections on Change in Arts-based Research: The Experiences of Two Music Therapists

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## Reflections on Change in Arts-based Research: The Experiences of Two Music Therapists

Arts-based research seems like a natural fit for music therapists conducting qualitative studies. As musicians, we are familiar with the practice of interpreting musical scores for performance. These “musical scores” can be read as symbols or images that portray particular compositional and personal narratives. In a research context, these scores are data forms (information). From this perspective, the practice of exercising our skills as musicians and bringing the arts into play as researchers begins to sound less radical. Susan Finley (2005) adds a dimension of activism when she states that “art is equal to, and may be at times more suitable than, science for moving people to action and advancing human understanding” (p. 686).

Drawing on our individual experiences using arts-based research techniques, this article weaves together two distinct narratives with common themes. By exploring our professional and personal journeys as music therapists in the arts-based research process we highlight the strengths and challenges of this approach that shaped our studies and gave light to emergent understandings through the arts.

### **Writing: An Oasis of Time**

#### Carolyn's Voice: Narrative One

I lived in New York for two years as a music therapy doctoral student. One of my pastimes when riding the subway was reading the advertisements. Squeezed in between an ad for hair replacement and an announcement for a marathon walk would be a “Poetry in Motion.” These were short poems, sometimes funny or poignant. Reading them gave my mind something to do, since my natural inclination to observe could be misinterpreted on the New York subway. Although I was not feeling “in motion” at the time, I decided to write a poem about Friday night writing:

*Sitting at my desk  
Staring into my mind to find  
Flitting ideas like butterflies in a field of flowers  
Sounds of sirens waft into my room  
Fog sits over The Towers  
  
Maybe a cup of coffee would help  
Is this what Friday night is like for writers?  
  
Suddenly I catch an idea  
Iridescent and shimmering I place it on the page  
And begin to write.*

The act of placing words on a piece of paper or onto the computer screen created an oasis of time. In this time the rush of experiences and information slowed down enough for me to catch ideas, and try to make sense of them. The “in your face” sounds of New York City became background noise to the quiet creation of text. Although the flow was not always there, writing became a refuge in the often

confusing land of qualitative research, especially when negotiating the research soundscape of group improvisational music therapy with five (5) music therapists as participants (Arnason, 1998).

### Deborah's Voice: Narrative One

I had been collecting data for my major research paper as part of my Master of Music Therapy degree at Wilfrid Laurier University and had almost completed the data analysis process. My research explored experiences of consciousness in clinical improvisation with a girl experiencing mental health issues. Together this client and I used art, music and words to reflect upon one particularly meaningful improvisation. Sitting at my desk considering the data I felt suddenly overwhelmed; the artistic and often ineffable quality of the data seemed to open itself up to a myriad of divergent possibilities. I too began to write, creating a soundscape on the screen that reflected my desire to let possibilities out rather than keeping them in:

Enough input Eee

*NO*

 $\mathcal{U}$ 

.....gh.

*Reading and gniLOOKdaer LOOK at what is going on all*

*ARooooooooooooooooooooooooound you around you you're*

HERE and still (trr) you'r(tr)e stilleyesfo(trem)cusedloo(t.)king(t...t...tr)butINside

[illegible]

*answersandquestions id*

*eas INspira*

tion.

*Let it (go) OUT*

*everything*

*tumblingdownpurplestarlight from your brain travels to the*

*tip*

*of your tongue and diving through Pyramuswallteeth*

*bouncing off springboardlips*

*sound in the world*

 $yoU$ 

*Trembling*

---

*Tremblin*

Creative writing has been an integral part of my life for many years. It allows me to reflect upon my experiences, synthesize ideas and understand concepts more deeply. Given that this is true for me, it seems only natural that I would be drawn to using the arts in my research project, especially when exploring such a nebulous topic as consciousness in clinical improvisation.

### **Artists Becoming**

#### **Carolyn's Voice: Narrative Two**

I have never thought of myself as a writer. Writers are people who have their latest creations displayed, fresh and inviting on a bookstore shelf. Writers are able to see events and relationships in multifaceted ways. They translate experiences into the printed word. When I read these words I feel a connection between their expression and my experience. Writers portray facets of their selves to the public view. I can receive these portrayals in the private realm of my home. Aspects of my self are revealed as I reflect on the writer's story.

Somehow though, as I wrote these thoughts about writing, I had a sense of *déjà vu*. These thoughts were closer to my experience than I imagined. Some of them even sounded like what a qualitative researcher does.

I remember being told in school that the best approach to writing was to write about what I knew. This sounded easy enough until I tried to figure out what it was I knew. Looking back now, the personal discovery of something I knew enough to write about may have begun in a social work class in the early 1990s. One of the "assignments" was to write a thought piece on a particular school of psychology, describing our impressions without looking up any information or citing references. I found this uncovering exercise to be both disconcerting and exhilarating. Disconcerting, because as a classically educated musician (pianist), I had for years diligently studied the "master" stories of Western art music. Exhilarating, because I began to hear my own voice as writer rise from the clamour of others' stories.

In this same social work class, a profound learning metaphor emerged for me of an overgrown rosebush in dire need of pruning. Only through the pruning process could sunlight begin to reach inside, allowing the flowers to bloom again.

I had begun the forging of friendly links between my personal and professional experiences. I then tried to figure out what realm of writing I worked in. Certainly not as a fiction writer. An academic writer? As a student and later as an educator, I read a lot of academic writing. I still do and I ask students to read it too. Some of this writing seems to perpetuate knowledge stories that readers do not understand but feel they should. I am reminded of the first time I heard the word "dichotomy" in a music criticism class at the University of Manitoba in the early 1970s. The sound of the word beguiled me, although I did not know its meaning. I did sense though that uttering this word conveyed a mysterious intelligence.

A few years ago, I was asked to explain that a narrative used in an article for publication was an "unconventional" style of writing. This narrative had been created in the arts- based qualitative analysis

process used in my dissertation study. The narrative was created from my analysis of the group's last improvisation, which lasted 50 minutes as well as participants' verbal processing of the music. I entitled this narrative "Recapitulation" because there was a palpable sense of returning to musical qualities, images, and feeling tones that had emerged throughout the process of this improvisational music therapy group. As I wrote (2002):

The main purpose of experimenting with this style of writing is to recreate rich complexities of the participants' musical experience that evolved through a course of 18 improvisational music therapy sessions. *This type of interpretive musical description is an exploration in writing musically* [italics added]. The narrative utilizes a mix of free verse poetry, prose and abbreviated sentences to represent in words the dynamic and creative nature of improvised music...the improvisation narrative combines musical excerpts with various levels of meaning derived from the analysis of [the] improvisation...(p. 7)

I look back on this experience and realize that being "unconventional" is part of who I am. The term "messy" has also been used to describe ethnographic texts (Marcus, 1994). Mess for me is something the cat might do. But I do see his meaning when remembering the response to my "unconventional" narrative. Perhaps I was being asked to "clean it up" according to certain standards of scholarship or valid clinical writing. We need courage to bring the arts into the research arena and in full view of empirical lionism. George Marcus (1998) goes on to say that in these kinds of texts "there is a sense of a whole, without evoking totality, that emerges from the research process itself...messy texts are messy because they insist on an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close" (p. 567).

From my perspective now, I think differently about writing. I really do like Virginia Woolf's "stream of consciousness" writing, although I do not always understand it (e.g., *The Waves*, 1931). Writing is not an easy form of expression for me. It is a revealing form of expression. My interpretation of scholarly writing has evolved. I am encouraged and inspired by writers who courageously explore and dare to share their discoveries.

### Deborah's Voice: Narrative Two

It was around the middle of my Bachelor of Music Therapy degree when I began to say aloud that music was the lens through which I best understood the world. I found that I could understand, for example: social situations; relationships; creative writing; visual art and; aspects of nature by relating it to my understanding of music and past musical experiences. I often have an impulse to write; for me, to process life creatively through poetry and words is an integral part of growing towards an understanding of life.

Transferring my innate knowledge that "art helps me understand and process life" to the idea that "art could also help other people understand and process life" was quite natural for me. Happily, music therapists have an ever-growing rich body of literature to draw on that speaks to this link between music and the therapeutic process. Diane Austin and Michele Forinash (2005) stated that "artistic forms are closer to the irrational world of the unconscious and the source of creativity and therefore come closer to capturing experience than the more rational world of words" (p. 470).

As a music therapist I offer music as a tool to search for meaning and understanding in perhaps a different way than a client may traditionally have access to. Does using music as a way to understand something change the way that we understand it? Does music elicit perhaps a different understanding of a concept than an exploration such as verbal psychotherapy? Is exploring a concept with a client through music different than exploring the same concept with that client through art, drama, or creative writing? What are the different paths to meaning? What are the different ways to discover? I wonder about these things using music and writing so often in my clinical work and personal life. Upon embarking on an arts-based research project, I began to ask myself these questions within the context of qualitative research.

Using music to communicate and explore somehow opens me and my client up to intangibilities, to expressing the ineffable. Gary Ansdell (1995), Leslie Bunt (1994) and Carolyn Kenny (1979) are among the many other music therapists have written and discussed similar clinical experiences, where music is used to express the inexpressible. In his letters to a young poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: “I feel that there is no one anywhere who can answer for you those questions and feelings which, in their depths, have a life of their own, for even the most articulate people are unable to help, since what words point to is so very delicate, is almost unsayable” (2000, p. 33). What are the words pointing to in such a sentence? Is there something about art that allows us to somehow say those things which Rilke identified as “almost unsayable” (p.33)? Working with the arts in the world of music therapy allows me access to this broad palette of expressiveness; a new and rich understanding of a concept that I am studying that is perhaps otherwise elusive. Arts-based research opened up the possibilities of understanding to include knowledge that may be exclusively accessed, experienced and/or expressed through the arts.

## **Introducing the Projects**

Carolyn’s Voice: Narrative Three

It is Time to Tell the Story of Six

### **Audio Example I: Session 2 Group Improvisation**

**Instrumentation: harpsichord, recorder, cabasa, conga, thumb piano, soprano xylophone, talking drum**

Although I did not know it at the time, my first experience of arts-based research was as a doctoral student at New York University. I was initiated into the exhilarating world of “writing as inquiry” in Margot Ely’s (1991, 1997) qualitative research classes, and exposed to authors’ writing such as Laurel Richardson (1997, 2005). These experiences were not called “arts-based research” per se and I did not identify my dissertation research as such. But in this affirmative learning context I discovered that the writing process could be both edifying and pleasurable. I studied in New York for two years and then returned home to Canada, full of anticipation to start my research.

Five (5) professional music therapists agreed to participate in the study, which explored their first-time experience in an improvisational music therapy group. It was also my first time facilitating such a

group. The improvisational experience included music improvisations, visual art, verbal dialogue, imagery and metaphoric perspectives. These were multiple sources of data, which I hoped would give the study a respectable level of trustworthiness. But as the research went on, these myriad data sources began to feel unwieldy. I wondered and worried how it was possible to create a text to communicate interplay between the music and evolving metaphors in the visual art that related to participants' individual and collective experience.

The first time experience of analyzing qualitative data, is an adventure in the unknown. But, bolstered by the confidence gained in Margot's classes, I continued to write, experimenting with different narrative forms. These forms of writing helped to meet the challenges of translating the multifarious nature of improvisational music therapy into text. I used a variety of creative narratives to analyze and (re)present possible interconnections among the music, the art and participants' experience of both. Metaphoric analysis helped to highlight subtleties in the data, alerting me to important ideas that may have "lost their way" in the process of amassing data. Sketches using free verse poetry described participant's personal and musical experience. Playlets portrayed interactive aspects in the group through spotlighting a dramatic moment in the group process. Layered stories (re) presented complexities and revealed levels of response or meaning. Vignettes were a type of short story that encapsulated a vivid moment when something shifted or changed.

The potentialities in this improvisational music therapy group were exciting and somewhat unsettling for both the participants and myself as researcher. In the first session, I asked the participants what title they would give this session, and provided one myself. One of the participants had described an ocean image in her journal and its connection to her feelings of anxiety. The following narrative is a *Metaphor Poem*. It is in a collective narrative voice. Free verse poetry conveys the feeling tone of early sessions and implied expectations of my role as researcher and group facilitator. I created the poem interpretively from my analysis of participants' verbal dialogue and their journal writing.

### *LOOKING TO THE FUTURE*

*We're honoured to be in this group, grateful for the opportunity*

*Waiting...*

*Confident that something is going to happen*

*We're not really anxious.....But we don't know what's going to happen*

*Sounds of the music linger in our memories, part of what we're trying to feel and express*

*Feeling kinship and resonance with our music*

*We've never been in a group like this before, without clear boundaries*

*We're lost and unsure of the possibilities.....*

*It's like being dropped in the middle of the ocean, not being able to see the shore*

*We know we're risk takers*

*It's pretty much a risk to come here  
If you don't take risks, you don't grow*

*But we won't survive, dropped into the middle of a vast ocean  
Left to find a solution*

*Six Little Ducks  
Boldly Going Where No One Has Gone Before  
Quo Vadis?  
Great Expectations  
Will We Or Won't We?  
Stay Tuned...*

#### Deborah's Voice: Narrative Four

My study was based upon the supposition that something extraordinary occurs in human consciousness during the artistic act of musical improvisation. For me it intuitively followed that more than words would be required to offer an initial understanding of my client's experience of consciousness during clinical improvisation and my connection to that experience. Thus my client, Jennifer, and I reflected on our improvisatory experiences via music, visual art, and words. I wondered if each different artistic medium would perhaps allow for or draw out a different perspective on our experiences, ultimately providing rich and meaningful data. This method of data collection launched Jennifer and I into the realm of arts-based research, which "emphasizes an artistic response to the raw data (interview, music, and so forth) as part of the data-generating process" (Austin and Forinash, p. 459). Austin and Forinash defined arts-based research as:

A research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method. Art forms such as poetry, music, visual art, drama, and dance are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting the research results. (pp. 458-459)

The arts played a primary role in both the data collection process and the presentation of the final results.

I selected visual art as an initial modality to offer Jennifer as a means to explore her experience of consciousness during clinical improvisation. I wondered if Jennifer may have difficulty or feel uncomfortable expressing herself verbally. I wanted to offer her an opportunity to express her consciousness in a modality where she might be able to communicate each aspect of her being (among them: spiritual, cognitive, emotional, and physical) without using words. Art provided that tangible medium; Jennifer and I each created paintings while listening to a recording of her initial improvisation.

#### Figure I

*Jennifer's Artwork based on her Reflective Listening to the Improvisation*



There is much information and feeling/emotional data contained in Jennifer's artwork. Austin and Forinash (2005) discussed that "art can be an organic process that engages the body, mind, and creative spirit and allows the researcher [and in this case the client as well] to revisit the data from another vantage point" (p. 460). To this end, I also used three kinds of creative writing to further reflect upon the initial clinical improvisation: free association; intuitive prose and; poetry. The following is one of three poems I wrote after reflecting upon the data.

*spirit wandering outside;  
a dre(dream)am  
too long there has been rain too  
long have i been outside  
there is warmth and fire and i want  
in  
there is love and care i want  
in  
out here i run from place to  
place  
people feed me they  
offer me something  
but it's not the same it's not  
you  
let me in  
to your world to your  
heart  
  
i promise  
i will be good.*

Finally, in addition to these visual and linguistic reflections, Jennifer and I each reflected musically on the recording. She engaged in a reflective clinical improvisation while being supported by me. This musical reflection allowed Jennifer to further develop and explore themes that she had introduced in the initial improvisation. It was valuable in both a clinical and research context. I also independently musically reflected on the experience. This independent improvisation containing strong emotional content for me and allowed me to experience musical concepts and intangible feelings from the initial improvisation in an unhurried and focused way.

### **Audio Example II: Deborah's Reflective Piano Improvisation (Excerpt)**

In addition to arts-based research, this research project drew on modified reflexive phenomenological theory. While empirical phenomenology focuses exclusively on the experiences of others, reflexive phenomenology allows the researcher to use her or his own experience of the phenomenon, writing descriptively from that perspective (Forinash & Grocke, p.321, 2005). I modified the reflexive phenomenological approach to not only incorporate my own reflections, but those of the client as well. In this way Jennifer's artistic reflections provided insight into the phenomenon, further contributing to

an understanding of her experience of consciousness and my connection to that experience. By equally incorporating Jennifer's and my artistic reflections, this modified reflexive phenomenological approach acknowledges the shared consciousness that I feel is present during clinical improvisation with my clients. An additional modification to the reflexive phenomenological methodology was the lack of bracketing, or epoché. I felt that it was unrealistic and unnecessary to attempt to "suspend or bracket" my "beliefs about the phenomenon being studied" (Forinash & Grocke, 2005, p. 321).

### Reflections on Artistic Methodology

#### Carolyn's Voice: Narrative Five

In the third session, I sketched a boat image on the blackboard; a boat on an ocean with six faceless stick figures, no shore in sight and an endless horizon. There's a hot sun and a few waves beneath the boat. The boat image portrayed an expectant time of lifting anchor and moving out of a sheltered port into an expansive body of water. The participants were intrigued by the image and each chose her stick figure on which to draw distinguishing features. One participant drew a rudder and keel for direction since being able to steer the boat was important. My figure stands in the middle of the boat, with four (4) eyes and a telescope in readiness for guiding this "crew" through a new experience. The narrative, *Contemplating the Boat Image* was influenced by feedback from an art therapist, a member of my research support group.

Figure II  
*The Boat Image*

#### CONTEMPLATING THE BOAT IMAGE

*A nutshell on the ocean  
Moon shape, not really anchored*

*Overloaded with people...no real volume  
It looks unbalanced – the figures seemingly floating  
All by themselves  
Not really contained in the boat*

*This boat on the ocean is not particularly safe or comfortable*

*Can we trust this lost boat?*

*Why use narrative writing forms?* The simple answer is that I used what had been taught in qualitative research courses. But this answer does not do justice to the question. The process of writing narratives was an artistically and ethically sound way to interpretively analyze the soundscape of this improvisational music therapy study. Out of the inceptive and ambiguous world of group

improvisational music therapy came a clarity of voice that revealed my self in relation to others. I was not “just” producing results. I was literally *in* this study. Over eighteen (18) sessions, there was the music of thirty-one (31) group improvisations, visual art, verbal dialogue, journal writing, musical analyses, a metaphoric journey, and everything unforeseen. This research study was about a particular improvisational music therapy group and, significantly, an improvisation itself. As in improvisation, there were times of playfulness and spontaneity, moments of uncertainty with subsequent intuitive shifts, and sometimes an overload of ideas.

Narrative writing kept my research aims in sight: (1) to allow the reader into the dynamics of this particular improvisational music therapy group and (2) to depict the contingencies of the improvisational music experience. Contingency is defined as “a possible future event or circumstance regarded as potentially able to influence action; a thing dependent on an uncertain event...” (The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, 1998, p. 305).

I discovered that narratives were poised to tap my sense of what was happening in the study. Poems, vignettes, layered stories, sketches – they all acted to unlock the mysteries of the data. Metaphors especially were the means by which my intuition became conscious enough to be expressed in words. As researcher, I noticed that metaphors and imagery naturally emerged in my analyses and were a creative scaffolding for making sense of the data and (re)presenting research findings. There was an underlying organic direction (form) and a distinct sense of movement. Narrative writing helped me to experience these with “uncommon eyes and ears.” It was a revelatory experience to find that analysis could be so involving and multifaceted.

As a classically educated pianist, the creation of narrative writing forms to artistically portray diverse findings, connected with my history. In the quest to become musicians, we experiment all the time. I have spent most of my life interpreting a variety of texts; musical scores, contemporary compositions (graphic notation), textbooks, novels, recipes, nature scenes, concerts, films, and visual art. I interpret “text” as an expressive work that can be “read”, whether it uses words, images, or sounds.

### **Audio Example III: Session 3 Group Improvisation**

#### **Instrumentation:**

Figure III

*The Forest Image*

The forest image represented the group journey. This image was visualized by a participant during an improvisation and it seemed to symbolize both mystery and celebration. The nature of the environment had changed; from precariously floating on an ocean beneath a hot sun to landing in a verdant and lit (with candelabra) world with ground underfoot and space in which to move.

Deborah’s Voice: Narrative Six

Artistic information is intrinsically linked with my work as a music therapist. In sessions, and especially in clinical improvisation, music and sound is how I learn about clients; I know through music, through art. That music carries valuable clinical information is a common theme in music

therapy literature. In describing the Nordoff-Robbins approach, Kenneth Bruscia (1987) stated: “Musical responses are viewed as a mirror of the person’s psychological and developmental condition, revealing both progressive attributes and pathological factors and having diagnostic implication” (p. 31). Mercédès Pavlicevic (1997) shared an experience with her client where “in listening to Noel, I heard him in the music: in fact, I heard both him and I. I was not listening to his musicianship or to his perceptual prowess. I heard a tightness, busy-ness, rigidity, that told me something about him” (p. 25). On perhaps a more humanistic level, Kenneth Aigen (2005) wrote that “there is a latent human theme within each musical theme” (p. 279). Similarly, Ronald Borczon (1997) stated that “to understand one’s timbre is to have a glimpse into one’s soul” (p. 19). I constructed my research methodology with this fundamental belief in mind; the same understanding that fuelled my clinical work would guide my research.

My experience of using arts in my research was therefore natural and intuitive. At the time, I thought I was just using various artistic means that made sense to use to collect data within a purely phenomenological school of thought. The arts were involved in my research before I was aware that arts-based research was a methodology unto itself.

After data collection and analysis had occurred, I was faced with the task of somehow synthesizing the findings of the analysis into a cohesive conclusion that said something about my topic; that incorporated the information I had gleaned and experienced through this process of arts-based research. Pondering the data analysis findings, I was still consciously envisioning a purely “traditional” and exclusively verbal conclusion to my research when vivid imagery and the story *A World of Our Creation* arrived intact in my imagination as a synthesis of the emergent research themes. Though at the time it seemed somewhat radical, it now seems quite fitting that presenting the research findings through creative and artistic means would be the ideal method in which to illustrate Jennifer’s and my journey of consciousness during clinical improvisation. How else could I convey the ineffable nature of the quality of this data than through the use of art? Austin and Forinash discuss that the use of imagery and metaphoric analysis “help[s] researchers bridge the conscious and unconscious worlds in order to access new insights and deepen the understanding of the data” (2005, p. 460). In my research, as in my clinical work, artistic forms offered unique and valuable ways of knowing.

#### Figure IV *A World of Our Creation*

Shaun McNiff (as cited in Austin and Forinash) described his students’ natural inclination to “integrate their personal creative expression with the production of a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation” (1998, p. 22). I too feel that this research process has been a cumulative artistic experience, invaluable enhancing my journey through the realm of improvisation and consciousness in my clinical work.

### **Looking Back to Move Forward**

#### Carolyn’s Voice: Narrative Seven

The reader might wonder why after more than ten (10) years I still wish to write about the process of

my dissertation research. In academia, one is supposed to “move on” from neophyte research efforts to more informed and, hopefully, informing results. Yes, there are some naive ideas in the study and my interpretations have shifted over the years. Although participant checking interviews were conducted, I do not expect that the participants agreed with all the findings. But each time I re-enter this study, I feel the writing genuinely depicts my first time experience conducting an arts-based qualitative study of an improvisational music therapy group.

As a music therapist, I improvise with clients, and with musicians. The potential for human expression in improvisation infuses the ways I make sense of my life experiences through writing. I cannot imagine researching improvisation and human relationships without the company of artistic media. I keep coming back to one of my favourite quotes about the experience of improvisation as “...a field of experimentation where we may learn to transcend previous borders of freedom...We find ourselves in a space emptied of experience where something more honest may come out of the hidden” (Fritz Hegi, cited in Ruud, 1995). The anthropologist Victor Turner used the word “liminality” to describe a period of transition where qualities of ambiguity and emotional intensity abound (cited in Ruud, 1995). Arts-based research is all about the liminal. Liminality allows in the self and the arts – capturing (even fleetingly) the process of creation (Susan Walsh, 2006). The author Janette Turner Hospital shares that “our very concepts of beauty and art stem from the inextricable meshing of transience and permanence, and of our simultaneous awareness of both” (source unknown). I genuinely believe that only art forms are flexible enough to hold these creative tensions.

#### Deborah’s Voice: Narrative Eight

During this research process, I thought that if my client and I reflected upon and experienced the phenomenon I was studying through three different artistic lenses (art, music, and poetry), that each medium might provide a unique insight into the phenomenon. Upon reflection, I am aware of another layer to this methodology which allowed me to go to a space deeper inside myself to further explore the topic. Arts-based research allowed me to use my whole self as researcher. Where there was emotional content to be explored, I was able to feel and emote. Where there was intellectual data to examine, I was able to think rationally and categorically. Where I felt something within my soul, artistic means of exploration and expression contained and touched on that mystery.

As discussed, my research framework was theoretically informed by modified reflexive phenomenology. This constructivist paradigm seeks subjective truth informed by perspective and personal understanding. By using art to go inwards I was able to gain a rich and meaningful understanding of this topic.

Though arts-based research was such a natural fit, indeed it was the foundation of my research, I did not initially feel confident using it. Could something *arts-based* be a legitimate research methodology? Perhaps it could be cushioned by phenomenology and single case-study research designs to remain an interesting complementary methodology? I remained uncertain of the academic validity of arts-based research; there remained a nagging doubt that something so intangible could be called *research*, that such a natural artistic exploration could qualify as a methodology. As a neophyte researcher, embarking on a qualitative research project was daunting; which methodology would most reflect what I believed? I initially chose phenomenology because it seemed like that was an important perspective

for my research. I used it woodenly, trepidatiously. Incorporating arts-based research into my study opened it up to a myriad of possibility and explorations that would otherwise have remained hidden.

#### Carolyn's Voice: Narrative Nine

I more clearly see now that my dissertation research was an “in-between time” of liminality, both in its uncertainty and productivity. I continue to be fascinated by stories (e.g., *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* [2003] by Thomas King). Jane Edwards (2006) suggests “that in our research endeavours we may have collectively avoided the delight of the inexplicable, the creative unknowing, *the potentials that exist in the unformed parts of our informed ideas* [italics added]...”.

The artfulness of qualitative research is an adventure in the unknown. But in the vibrant learning environments at New York University, and the surrounding chaos of Manhattan, I found a way of becoming. I could not have completed this study or still be referring to it years later, if I had not responded to the potentialities in “non conventional” forms of writing and the arts.

In arts-based research, I found my place of belonging

#### Deborah's Voice: Narrative Ten

In retrospect, it is impossible to detach what it meant to use art in research from what it means for me to use art to interpret life. It is also impossible to detach it from the research project itself. As E. E. Cummings articulated, each conclusion left me wanting to know more: “Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question” (1938, Preface). For me, an arts-based understanding of a phenomenon is akin to a most beautiful arts-based understanding of life; it offers few concrete answers, rather a blossoming of the self that allows an opening up to new and richer understandings.

### **The Denouement**

As Deborah and Carolyn explored their distinct experiences with arts-based research, common themes emerged. First, the potential clarity of metaphors. The metaphor of *being on a journey in music* emerged early on in Carolyn's research study and became an integrative group theme. Aspects of this theme included being in a boat on the ocean, discovering the identities of participants' stick figures, finding different sights and sounds, experiencing a lull in the group process (“there was no wind”), becoming a wild tribe and, finally, landing in a forest scene (see Figure III).

The belief that “anything goes” in arts-based research, similar to a misperception of improvisation, is clearly not the case. The demands of arts-based research are noticeable for anyone who has done this kind of research. It can be hard knowing when to stop and to leave the creative process alone, allowing “it” to “incubate” (Moustakas, 1990). Monitoring our capacity for (re) searching and engaging in self care as an arts-based researcher are always parts of the process.

It takes a long time to absorb and understand what has been learned in the process of doing. There are many ways of knowing that embrace creative, emotional and imaginative as well as intellectual capacities. Arts-based research is full of contingencies, potentialities and intangibilities. It is possible to

hear the sounds of dichotomies breaking apart. However, at some point in the research process, researchers can count on becoming overwhelmed and confused with all the ineffability. But...these feelings fuel the process. The artistic process of (re)search is sustained by feelings.

As Thomas Kuhn (1996) so rightly emphasized, researchers need to find (or create) a supportive research community. *The Ugly Duckling* is an archetypal narrative about the search for belonging (Estés, 1995. p. 164). Deborah and Carolyn are heartened by the groundswell of artistic qualitative inquiry. They both found the affirmation of mentors to support and guide them. We need the company of “arts warriors” to engage in the arts for research crusade and to withstand our own “trepidatiousness.”

Trust is essential in arts-based research, yet elusive. Perhaps all these ways of knowing are about releasing inner wisdom through the intuitive process of arts-based research. Deborah reminds us to listen to what the arts have told us in our own lives, taking this knowledge into our professional lives as researchers. For her, “music is the lens through which we understand the world...” Carolyn encourages us to trust our skills as musicians; the experience of learning how to listen to, practice and interpret “musical scores” for technical and expressive communication.

As arts-based researchers, we can play in the discipline of writing – text play. Text does not have to be *immutable*, a word that Carolyn used in her dissertation to describe her frustrations (at the time) of trying to put musical and non-verbal data “into words.” The quote by Rilke reveals the possibilities of shifting our view away from “the limits of words” and accepting wholeheartedly “what words point to...”

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